Q&A with Directors Richard E. Robbins and Martha Adams

The film is a hybrid of a documentary and narrative film. Can you explain what that means?

We’ve never loved the word hybrid, which seems to evoke a car without quite enough power. For us it’s really all about finding compelling ways to tell stories. When we decided that we wanted to tell Nasro’s story, we were totally open to finding the most effective and compelling ways to do that, regardless of convention. In the original Girl Rising film, each chapter is different. Some involve actors. Some don’t. Some involve scripted dialogue, while others have no speaking at all. For us, it is really about the best way to bring each girl’s story to the screen. We like to think that we have the best of both worlds: the essential truth of a documentary with the control and flexibility of fiction.

How did you choose Nasro for the film?

Warsan Shire, the writer behind Brave Girl Rising, was the one who chose Dadaab Refugee Camp as the location for this film. She wanted to tell the story of Somali refugees, a population she feels have been long-forgotten.

With the support of the International Rescue Committee, we traveled to the camp to meet more than a hundred girls. They were a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. Some were enrolled in school. Others had never attended a day of school. We then conducted group interviews and eventually one-on-one interviews with about 30 girls. When we returned home, we brought all the material we collected to Warsan with some thoughts about our top choices, and she immediately fell in love with Nasro.

Is Nasro’s story true? What really happened?

The inspiration for Nasro’s story is her own vivid description of her life. She was recently attacked by a group of young men, and did fight them off. Word spread throughout the camp and she became a role model for others. Sexual assault is the greatest danger girls face in Dadaab, and in refugee situations globally.

Did actors perform in the film?

The film was shot entirely on location in Dadaab, with Nasro’s friends, family and neighbors playing the other parts in the story. There were no professional actors in the film. Everyone who appears on screen is either a refugee and resident of Dadaab, or a person who works with refugees, such as an aid worker or a soldier.

There was one participant in the film — the eldest of the three young men who threaten Nasro on the way to school— who had taken a few acting classes and performed in community plays. We thought he did a great job.

What was the most memorable part of shooting?

The whole shoot was incredible in both good and bad ways. We worked inside a whirlwind of barely controllable chaos in which anything—whether heartbreaking or uplifting—could happen.

For example, one morning we were preparing to film inside the hospital. When “extras” were checking in and getting instructions for the scene, we were approached by a woman who told us she was attacked by a
soldier who dragged her into the forest, raped her and threatened to kill her and her son if she told anyone. She waited to speak with us in the hopes that we could help, and thankfully, IRC staff were close on hand to provide support.

Beyond the terribly difficult moments, the best part of the shoot were the relationships we made with the IRC team, the cast and the crew. As ready as we were to return home to our families, it was very hard to say goodbye.

**What was most challenging?**

There were plenty of things that were physically challenging about working in Dadaab. The heat was excruciating. Crowds were hard to manage. The work was very intense.

But without a doubt the most intense challenges were mental. We walked a fine line between our desire to understand and portray the plight of refugees, and the danger of being swallowed whole by the enormity of the refugee crisis. It is extremely hard to come into a situation where there is such an incredible need for resources and not be able to bring immediate help to those who are suffering.

**How did the narrators Tessa Thompson and David Oyelowo get involved?**

David has been working with Girl Rising for several years. He is a passionate advocate for girls and has long supported refugee girls in Nigeria via a non-profit called Geanco.

Tessa Thompson has also become a remarkable activist. And when we imagined Narso’s voice — this combination of authority and irreverence, yet imbued with a youthful idealism — it was Tessa who came to mind.

**What do you want the audience to take away from the film?**

These refugees aren’t very different from us, yet they are put into a situation that we can barely comprehend. Yes, they need our help, but they are not victims. They are opportunities.

**What can viewers do to help?**

We hope you will share the film with your family, school, business, place of worship and beyond. We’ve also made curriculum and a host of other tools we hope you find helpful.

Also, if you are in a position to host a fundraiser or donate, know that every single contribution — no matter how small — is meaningful and will fuel our ongoing efforts to help end gender discrimination around the world.

Lastly, volunteer! Contact your local IRC office and see how you can help refugees who are living in your community.

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*Richard E. Robbins is an award-winning writer, director, and producer whose work includes both fiction and nonfiction. He spent a dozen years at ABC News and PBS’s “Frontline” covering both international and domestic affairs. He is a founding partner of The Documentary Group, a New York-based film and television production company.*

*Martha is the Chief Creative Officer of Girl Rising and is an award-winning storyteller who produced the film Girl Rising. She is a Senior Fellow at The University of Southern California’s Marshall Brittingham Social Enterprise Lab and serves as a Film Expert for the U.S. Department of State diplomacy program American Film Showcase.*